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DIRECTORATE OF
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Intelligence Memorandum

PING PONG DIPLOMACY

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Ping Pong Diplomacy

1. Peking's decision to allow the members of the US table tennis team, accompanying officials, and newsmen to enter China is unquestionably a breakthrough of considerable significance. In itself, it is a major new departure for the Communist Chinese. But is it merely an end in itself, or do the Chinese have other considerations in mind? If so, how important are these additional considerations? And are there wider implications for Sino-US relations in this gesture?

Reactions in Taiwan

2. It seems reasonable to suppose that Peking expects to kill several birds with this particular stone. One important factor in Chinese calculations undoubtedly is the effect the Communist initiative is likely to have in Taipei. Although the Nationalist Chinese have reacted in relatively low key, they most certainly have been pained by the new development. Taipei papers are calling Peking's gesture a "plot" and are suggesting that Washington has been bamboozled by clever Communist tactics. To be sure, the Nationalists half expected that Peking would open the door at least part way once US visa restrictions had been lifted, and therefore the Communist move can hardly be a complete surprise to

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them. Moreover, the fact that Americans are entering the mainland is a concomitant rather than a cause of the strains now present in the Washington-Taipei relationship. The tendering of the invitation, together with its immediate acceptance, is a graphic illustration of those more fundamental strains. The publicity attendant on the visit--much of it orchestrated by Peking--has driven this point home to the Nationalists and can hardly be lost on other international observers.

...and in the USSR

3. Just as in their brief resumption of the Warsaw talks last year, the Chinese must in this instance have carefully weighed the repercussions their gesture would have in Moscow, always sensitive to signs, however faint, of a rapprochement between Peking and Washington. Soviet papers have run a brief account of the visit directly beneath a report of Peking's most recent "serious warning" to the US, with the obvious intention of contrasting Chinese words and deeds. This, of course, is a standard propaganda ploy, though in this case the Soviets can derive but cold satisfaction from demonstrating that Chinese actions belie Chinese words, given the nature of those actions. Peking both welcomes and expects such signs of Soviet nervousness regarding the possibility of a marked improvement in Sino-US relations.

...and in Japan

4. Peking must view the foregoing considerations as standard factors in any dealings of a polite nature with the United States or its citizens. But in this instance the Chinese initiative conveyed a message to Japan as well. Although the invitation to the American table tennis players was tendered on Japanese soil--and was paralleled by similar invitations to the British, Canadians, and Colombians--the Japanese themselves were snubbed. The implication of this action, or lack of action, must be clear to Tokyo: Japan could be left behind in a general and mutual improvement of relations between Washington

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and Peking unless the Sato government changes its China policy. This point has no doubt been underlined by Japanese press reaction to the visit: each step of the trip has been reported under banner headlines in virtually all papers, and the development in general has been treated as a major new departure in Sino-US relations.

Broader International Ripples

5. More important still, from Peking's point of view, will be the reverberations of its move among parties not directly involved in the transaction itself. In terms of general impact, the invitation to the Americans is the clearest and most dramatic indication yet that China is now following a foreign policy of "moderation and reason." This bit of public drama will no doubt be useful as Peking continues its efforts to win more friends and greater influence around the world. Moreover, the implication embedded in the invitation--that Sino-US relations are in the process of improvement--may help remove inhibitions on the part of those states that are now in the course of rethinking their China policy. All this might not translate directly into recognition of Peking by additional countries or into additional votes for seating the Communists in the United Nations, but it will certainly have an effect on the atmosphere in which these twin Chinese quests are conducted. In the short run this may be the most important benefit Peking foresaw in tendering the invitation to the American players. UN corridors are already abuzz with talk about the significance of the Chinese gesture, and the consensus appears to be that Peking's chances for admission to the world body have improved.

The US Target

6. It is obvious, however, that the Chinese are not simply interested in the reaction of third parties to their new move. They also have its impact on the United States firmly in mind. Peking's orchestration of the visit--the tendering of the invitation by the secretary-general of the Chinese table tennis association personally, the warmth of welcome

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accorded the visiting players, the special facilities provided the accompanying newsmen to transmit copy and film to the United States quickly--clearly indicates that the Chinese hope and expect to achieve a maximum favorable impression of Chinese "good will" in this country. Indeed, the interest the visit has aroused in the United States, coupled with initial expressions of pleased surprise in the US media, has probably caused Peking to escalate its efforts in this respect. Chou En-lai's hastily arranged meeting with the American team and Peking's belated approval of additional visas to newsmen Tillman Durdin and Mark Gayn suggest that the Chinese have taken additional ad hoc measures to capitalize on the favorable response their initial actions elicited.

7. All this is "people's diplomacy" with a vengeance. Without committing themselves directly on the major state-to-state issues that divide them from Washington, the Chinese have materially improved the atmospherics surrounding those issues. This "people-to-people" aspect of the visit has been stressed in Chinese official comment on the Americans' tour and has been underlined by Chou En-lai himself with his remark that a "new page" in Sino-US affairs has now been opened. Clearly the Chinese do not expect the visit by the table tennis players to be a one-shot affair. Chou has indicated that additional American newsmen will be allowed to enter China at intervals, and it is almost certain that other groups and individuals will also be permitted to enter the country. At least some Chinese groups will probably be sent to the United States as a "reciprocal" gesture.

8. These exchanges may not be confined to newsmen, scholars, groups of athletes, or the like. There are in fact signs that Peking may be interested in arranging visits of US political figures to China in the near future. Sihanouk recently told that Chou En-lai had remarked early in April that a visit by Senator Mansfield "might now be possible." Sihanouk added that when he had raised this subject with Chou (apparently at Sihanouk's initiative) on an earlier occasion, Chou

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had shown no interest in such a visit. The Chinese may be considering admission of other members of Congress as well.

Washington's Reaction

9. The reasons for Peking's interest in "opening" China to US citizens are fairly clear. The Chinese believe that the international situation is becoming favorable for them and that Washington will have to adjust itself to the changing situation. To this end it behooves them to encourage groups and individuals in the United States who might press Washington to move farther and faster than it would otherwise be inclined to do toward bettering Sino-US relations, and toward eventual recognition of Peking. Chou's remarks to the table tennis players about the opening of a "new page" in relations between the two countries was clearly designed to generate pressures of this sort.

10. For a variety of historical reasons, however, "people-to-people" diplomacy is inseparable from the larger question of state relations between Washington and Peking--and the Chinese are well aware of this fact. Indeed, much of the discussion at Warsaw over the years has concerned precisely such matters as exchanges of visitors, newsmen, and scholars between the two countries. For a dozen years, however, the Chinese have insisted that the Taiwan issue is the major bone of contention between the two parties, and that the kinds of exchanges that now seem possible were merely of secondary concern. It is unlikely that their views on this matter have essentially changed, but there have been signs that Peking is aware that atmospherics would have to be improved before real progress could be made on the central problem. In fact, this seems precisely what is now occurring--outside the context of the Warsaw talks.

11. Peking has been watching closely the evolution of US China policy over the past year and a half--the private comments of Chinese officials make this quite explicit--and has clearly taken aboard US statements that Washington hopes and intends to lessen the long-standing tensions between the two parties. The Chinese

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have almost certainly also taken aboard US observations that Washington's attempts to defuse tensions have met with no response from Peking. The Chinese invitation to the table tennis players, coming scarcely three weeks after the United States had lifted all restrictions on American travel to China, was clearly Peking's response to the earlier US move and an acknowledgement of Washington's previous piecemeal gestures toward Peking. Thus, the new Chinese initiative must be viewed as a move on the chessboard of state-to-state relations as well as a "people-to-people" ploy.

Bilateral Relations

12. Does this mean that the Chinese now believe that the time is ripe for a significant forward move in state-to-state relations? Surely they must suspect, when reviewing the history of the antagonisms and misunderstandings of the past 20 years, that Washington is interested in little more than a slight improvement in the atmospherics surrounding the difficult relations between the two parties. The war in southeast Asia goes on, and the US is still "occupying" Taiwan. These are formidable obstacles to real movement in bilateral relations. Nevertheless, there are indications that important Chinese leaders believe that the US is indeed winding down the war in Vietnam, and that the tenor of discussion of the "China problem" in the United States is changing, with rising pressure on the government to reach some sort of accommodation with Peking. If this is their reading of the situation, the Chinese are almost certainly interested in discovering how the Nixon Doctrine will apply in practice to China and to the outstanding differences between the two countries.

13. And even as regards Taiwan--still the most massive obstacle to better relations with the US--the Chinese are probably beginning to see new reasons to facilitate a slight thaw in long frozen positions, and to refix them in a more favorable mode. They may indeed be finding themselves in something of a dilemma over Taiwan. On the one hand, their recent successes in international diplomacy and at the UN seem on the verge of accomplishing their objective of completely

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undercutting Taipei's claim to speak and act as the "real China." But, on the other hand, even as this is occurring, it seems that more and more nations and individuals are likely to consider that whatever the two Chinese governments may claim, the Nationalist regime is de jure as well as de facto a separate entity, exercising sovereignty over precisely the area under its direct control--Taiwan. From Peking's point of view, this is a trend that must be reversed--and reversed sooner rather than later. To allow things to drift might well result in a situation in which Japan was as interested as the United States, or even more so, in preserving Taiwan as a political entity separate from the mainland. Some movement on the Taiwan problem is necessary to prevent this from happening, and the Chinese leaders may well consider that now, while the United States remains near the center of the picture and before too many parties become frozen in a "one China, one Taiwan" position, is the time to initiate some action. Peking in this instance would wish to change the context of the Taiwan problem without actually "solving" it.

14. Much, of course, will depend on how the Chinese read their chances of encouraging flexibility in the US position on Taiwan. They have certainly been following with great care the evolution of the relationship between Taipei and Washington over the past year, and although they are probably not especially optimistic, it is likely that they believe that the static situation of the past 20 years is undergoing a change. Since late 1969, Chinese officials have been privately probing for a firm reading of Washington's views on the Taiwan problem, and it is likely that Peking will wish to test the water in Warsaw in the relatively near future. Indeed, if they wait too long, the approaching vote in the United Nations might inhibit both sides from resuming the contact in Poland.

15. In any event, political considerations of the sort noted above are certain to take precedence, in Chinese eyes, over commercial interests. If the Chinese opt to take advantage of the opportunities for trade provided by the US decision of

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14 April to reduce economic barriers, it will be because they believe that additional domestic pressures on Washington to move still farther will thereby be generated. But Sino-US trade would still be a slow-growing and sometime thing.

Conclusions

16. Since political considerations remain paramount, it is almost certain that Peking believes that further diplomatic discussions with the US should not be postponed indefinitely both for the reasons already cited and also because the Soviet factor remains prominent in the Chinese mind. Finally, a clear-cut indication that Sino-US relations are improving would advance China's quest for additional recognition and for entry into the United Nations. Whether or not any or all of its desiderata can be achieved no doubt remains problematical from Peking's point of view. It is likely, however, that the Chinese see delectable possibilities and want to explore them. Probably the Chinese leaders believe that any progress in Sino-US relations will come slowly. But the invitation to the US table tennis team is a good indication that they wish to move relations off dead center.

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